
This article is based on the Campbell Review:

David B. Wilson, Doris L. MacKenzie, Fawn Ngo Mitchell: *Effects of Correctional Boot Camps on Offending* The Campbell Collaboration 2005.

*This article is written by the Nordic Campbell Centre. The article has been approved by the authors of the review.
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Boot camps do not reduce criminal behaviour

Boot camps are disciplinary institutions where young criminals are placed under militaristic conditions in the belief that a stay at a boot camp can help reduce the risk of the young people relapsing into crime. The method is especially common in the USA, but in other countries there is also debate as to whether the controversial boot camps should be tested. However, a new international Campbell Review of the best research findings establishes that the method does not have a positive effect compared to other traditional forms of correctional practice when it comes to reducing criminal behaviour.

Strict discipline – a solution?

In recent years, boot camps have become increasingly common as alternatives to probation and imprisonment for both young people and adults, especially in the USA. A typical boot camp is organised as a kind of military camp with a rigorous daily schedule of activities, physical training, uniforms and tough punishment for misbehaviour. Beyond this, the contents of the programmes can vary greatly. For instance, programmes can also contain various types of academic education and/or therapy.

Despite the increasing popularity of the method, it remains controversial. Advocates claim that the strict discipline contributes to positive behavioural changes in the young people, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will relapse into criminal behaviour. Critics, however, are convinced that boot camps may actually increase the antisocial behaviour and criminal activities of participants. They also claim that the rigorous discipline reduces the chances that any therapeutic programming can be successful.

The objective of this review is – on the basis of a thorough literature search – to study the effects of boot camps and militaristic programmes on recidivism, based on a meta-analysis of the best outcome studies.

Boot camps are neither worse nor better than prison

Previous boot camp participants are just as likely as other previously sentenced offenders to relapse into criminal behaviour. This research review thus concludes that boot camps as a whole have neither a greater nor a lesser effect on recidivism than all of the alternatives combined.

However, there is an indication – based on three studies – that boot camp participants are more likely to relapse into criminal behaviour when compared solely to the alternative of probation.

Boot camps are equally ineffective regardless of the type of criminal behaviour committed by the young person, their age or gender.

The authors therefore conclude that while there may be other arguments for utilising boot camps as an alternative punishment, the ability of the method to reduce recidivism cannot be used as an argument.

A sub-analysis based solely on three studies indicates a negative effect for young criminals in boot camps that do not include counselling or therapeutic components.

The authors of this review have not been able to study the effects of the individual sub-elements of the boot camp method on the overall outcome. This is because the individual outcome studies do not contain enough details in the descriptions of how the different boot camps are organised, the extent to which the different elements are incorporated, etc.

Facts about this review

This research review examines boot camps in which offenders are sentenced to a militaristic environment and/or structured, rigorous physical activity. The participants are kept extremely busy from early morning until late in the evening with physical training, drills and ceremonies. Punishment for even minor offences is immediate and usually involves physical activity. Boot camps for young offenders will typically also include academic education and therapeutic elements.

The analyses covered by this research review are based on 43 outcome studies, involving almost 120,000 young people and adults in total who participated in boot camps or militaristic programmes. Of these studies, 40 come from the USA, one from Canada and two from the UK. The studies measure recidivism in several different ways: arrests, sentences, imprisonment, etc. For the studies that conducted measurements over several durations of time (e.g. after 12, 24 and 36 months), the authors of the research review chose the measurement with the longest timeframe that still covered at least 90% of the original participants. Regardless of which of these measurements was studied, the conclusion was the same: boot camps are neither worse nor better than e.g. imprisonment.

The outcome studies covered by this review compare young people and adults who participate in a boot camp with young people or adults who undergo traditional forms of correctional punishment – probation or short-term imprisonment. Only outcome studies in which all participants are under the supervision of the criminal justice system, i.e. have been sentenced for a crime, are included.

Recommendations for future research

It would be very beneficial for future studies of boot camps to be more exhaustive when describing the individual elements of the programmes. This would make it possible, for instance, to study whether therapeutic programming within the framework of a boot camp can be an effective method overall.